

**Senate Bills 710 and 711**  
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Good afternoon, Majority Leader Meekhof and members of the committee.

My name is Nick Paradiso. I have the privilege of serving as vice president of partner services and government relations at National Heritage Academies. I am grateful to be invited to testify today on behalf of NHA and our dedicated employees who embody our vision and purpose: "**to better educate more children**" and "**challenge each child to achieve.**" I appreciate the opportunity to comment on Senate bills 710 and 711, a package of legislation that seeks to improve the educational landscape in Detroit.

I am here today to express support for this legislation.

The challenges we consider today are complicated, and there is no easy solution. It is up to Michigan's adults to get this right so children get the schools they deserve.

NHA first embraced this ideal in 1995, when our founder and chairman, J.C. Huizenga, launched a single charter school. Today we are proud to partner with 81 public charter schools across Michigan and eight other states. These schools serve more than 55,000 students, including nearly 34,000 students in 48 schools in our home state of Michigan.

We launched our first partner school in Detroit in 2001 and added six more over the next decade. All told, NHA's Detroit schools serve more than 5,700 students, with another 200 students on these schools' wait lists.

The vast majority of these students – about 94 percent – are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. This reflects our commitment to serve **any** student in **any** Detroit neighborhood.

For example:

- Legacy Charter Academy on East Hildale.
- Detroit Merit Charter Academy on Alter Road.
- Warrendale Charter Academy on Sawyer Street.
- Flagship Charter Academy on Wisconsin.

I have been to **all** of these schools, and I have seen that they are in every corner of this city. I have also seen in certain instances that these schools help hold the community together. This was the vision of our founder, J.C. Huizenga, 20 years ago. It remains NHA's vision today. And it is why I am so honored to be part of NHA.

The schools are student-centered. The schools provide hope for families because the schools are working. Public charter schools embrace accountability in exchange for autonomy. This model works. Charter schools provide excellent opportunities for thousands of students. This year, all seven of our Detroit partner schools outperformed the Detroit city school district as a whole **and** the closest district schools. For example, Flagship Charter Academy has proficiency rates in English language arts that are 25 percent higher than the closest school that students would otherwise attend. Students at Detroit Merit posted math proficiency rates that are 22 percent higher than the closest DPS school.

Perhaps the most important point to emphasize is that it is NHA's use of the charter model that makes this possible. This model allows us to respond quickly and efficiently to take advantage of things that are working and address areas that need improvement.

We were pleased when Detroit Mayor Duggan, in his testimony last week, listed these and other NHA partner schools among the best-performing schools in the city.

I also want to take a moment here to commend Mayor Duggan for his focus on giving all Detroit families what they deserve: great schools. We definitely don't agree on every point, and we do have some different views on how to achieve this ideal. But no one can doubt Mayor Duggan's sincerity.

I share background on NHA's Detroit commitment to emphasize that we formed our views on Detroit education reform not from afar, but from first-hand experience operating schools that work. Although our schools do work, by no means do we declare victory in the ongoing effort to address the long-term educational needs of Detroit's children. Every day, we strive to do better in meeting the needs of Detroit students. We do this by working in close partnership with each school board that oversees our work... and by embracing the accountability that comes from the charter authorizer and from our contract with each partner board.

We credit our success to good systems and good people – tireless administrators, teachers, and staff who focus every day on serving students. We believe that student learning is an adult responsibility. We strive to have an excellent teacher in each classroom, each day. We support these teachers by making an unusually strong commitment to observing, coaching, and mentoring each teacher.

We also make parental partnerships a priority – because we know that parental engagement contributes to student learning. Each of our schools has dedicated space where parents can meet so they can spend as much time at the school as they want to.

We enrich our rigorous academic curriculum with a focus on character development because we believe that great schools should develop students' hearts as well as their minds.

Finally, when we see that students need extra academic support, we implement a systematic approach to intervention. Dedicated intervention professionals address individual students' needs, providing extended learning time and increasing instructional intensity for students who are below grade level.

In Detroit, NHA made these commitments – and the multi-million dollar investments that made them possible – at a time when many residents, businesses, and other investors were leaving. We created and maintain clean, well-equipped buildings that have become beacons of hope and sources of pride in their neighborhoods. And we made these **private** investments to do **public** good.

Let me describe just one example. Detroit Enterprise was a multi-million dollar rehabilitation project just across the street from a DPS school that was closed. There was not one other K-8 school – district, charter, or private – in the neighborhood. Students still needed access to a high-performing school, of course. NHA's operational model makes it possible.

We have not wavered in our determination to serve Detroit children. We believe that public school choice, like that provided by Detroit Enterprise, can accelerate Detroit's recovery – **if** the manner in which we provide that choice focuses on what **students** need.

The Senate legislation we are discussing today is, to put it simply, the strongest reform proposal that we have seen. It takes a pragmatic, thoughtful approach to achieving the goal we all embrace: creating more high-

performing schools for Detroit's children. We know discussions about this package of legislation will continue, that there may be changes, and that improvements may be possible. But this legislation provides a strong foundation for both ensuring the financial viability of public schools and implementing helpful reforms to the school district's structure and operations.

For starters, this package of legislation would address the problem of Detroit schools' debt. As Mayor Duggan has noted, Detroit schools now spend nearly as much on debt as they do on employees. The district's monthly cost of payroll and benefits is about \$28 million; its monthly debt payments are \$26.1 million.

Addressing this problem is essential. I think we all can agree that all Detroit families need good schools – clean, secure learning environments with excellent teachers. Too many Detroit classrooms fall far short of this standard. We cannot achieve sustained improvement without financial equilibrium in the city school district.

We also admire this legislative package for what it omits.

This legislation does not propose multiple layers of new government agencies with expanded bureaucratic powers. It focuses taxpayer dollars on schools, not bureaucracies. It creates no new layers of government that would effectively limit parents' options. Such proposals can only stall efforts to improve students' access to good schools.

All Detroit children must have the opportunity to attend a good school. Our focus must be on children and their families, not on systems and bureaucracies. Some discussion on this issue has focused too much on the wrong questions. Our focus should not be on what government structures should drive reform. We think that's misguided. Nor should we debate how to

"control" or "restrict" choice, or blame policies that have given parents more choice.

Instead of thinking about bureaucratic values like process and control, we should be striving to ensure that all students have access to high-quality school choices – whether those schools are district schools or charter schools. Let's highlight those schools that do the right things the right way – so we can make sure they have a clear path to replicate to serve more students.

Running schools is hard and challenging, but it is also essential. We respect and thank all teachers and principals who accept the challenge of serving students in Detroit. In fact, we ***honor*** them. Let's help these hard-working professionals succeed – by learning what our most successful schools are doing right – district schools, charter schools, any schools – and making it easier for educators to replicate those successes.

Thank you again for this opportunity to share our views on this important issue and for the sense of urgency you are bringing to this challenge.

I am happy to take questions.